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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 001887

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/FO, AF/W, INR/AA; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2019

TAGS: PHUM PINS PREL KIRF NI

SUBJECT: US COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
MAKES RETURN VISIT TO NIGERIA

REF: A. ABUJA 1436 AND PREVIOUS

¶B. ABUJA 0745 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Counselor James P. McAnulty
for reasons in Sections 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation came to Nigeria October 4-9 to follow up on its March 2009 visit and subsequent designation of Nigeria as a "country of particular concern." The delegation met with the Ministers of Interior, Justice, and Foreign Affairs as well as civil society groups, the National Human Rights Commission, security forces, and National Assembly members, who cited socio-economic problems and political manipulation as the root causes of sectarian violence. Many of the GON interlocutors called for increased training for security forces and improvements in Nigeria's criminal justice system.

AG TO ASK STATES FOR PROSECUTION DETAILS

¶2. (C) Attorney General and Justice Minister Michael Aondoakaa insisted that the GON did not foment religious conflict, which he blamed on politically-manipulate malign individuals. He described homicide and rioting as the responsibility of the states which meant the federal government had little if any role in the investigation or prosecution of most incidents of sectarian violence. He stated that he did not know how many individuals had been prosecuted for such cases, but agreed to ask State Attorneys General for details. (Note: Embassy followed up by a letter with a formal request for such information per Aondoakaa's request.) The AG asserted His commitment to work with the USG on deterring and punishing acts of sectarian violence.

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
ACKNOWLEDGES SHORTCOMINGS

¶3. (SBU) MFA Permanent Secretary Ambassador Joe Keshi, who had invited USCIRF to return to Nigerian and was instrumental in securing GON appointments for the delegation, said that communal harmony was a central GON objective that has yet to

be fully achieved. He acknowledged that the GON is "not strong at prosecution" but observed that such shortcomings involved the entire criminal justice system and not just sectarian violence. He ascribed such shortcomings to Nigeria's legacies of colonial and military rule. Keshi advised the delegation not to overlook economic factors contributing to violence, specifically citing the large numbers of unemployed youth easily prone to manipulation.

¶4. (SBU) At a breakfast hosted by Foreign Minister Ojo Maduekwe, Commissioner Leo explained USCIRF had returned to find out how the USG could help promote religious respect rather than just criticize Nigeria for the lack of prosecutions. Leo said improving the rule of law would go a long way toward preventing further conflict, and he shared the delegation's intention to request information on prosecutions from the State Attorneys General through the Justice Minister.

¶5. (SBU) Maduekwe commended USCIRF for their approach, and acknowledged Nigeria's struggle to address sectarian and impunity problems. He blamed sectarian violence on economic and other factors that had no direct connection to religion. Previously, he admitted, the GON did not push energetically to punish offenders for fear of provoking further violence, but underscored that this practice clearly had to stop. Maduekwe noted that Nigeria has the largest Muslim population in Africa which, "apart from a few hiccups, lives peacefully with the Christian population." He recounted Nigeria's dramatic ethnic reconciliation after the calamitous Biafran civil war as evidence of Nigeria's basic commitment to

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tolerance and mutual respect.

REGIONAL THREATS AFFECT NIGERIA

¶6. (SBU) Interior Minister Shettima Mustapha told the delegation that his Ministry promoted national security through control of immigration and working to exclude known extremist foreigners from Nigeria. The Ministry of Interior Permanent Secretary cautioned, however, that infiltration by extremists of any West African country could put Nigeria at risk, because of open porous borders and ethnic ties across national boundaries.

LAWMAKERS INSIST NO NEW LAWS NEEDED

¶7. (SBU) Senate Judiciary, Human Rights, and Legal Matters Committee Chairman Umaru Dahiru said sectarian conflicts resulted from widespread corruption and poverty, claiming "people misconstrue socio-economic policies as religious; if you improve economic conditions there would not be religious conflict." Senate Drugs, Narcotics, and Anti-Corruption Committee Chairperson Sola Akinyede and Police Affairs Committee Chairperson Mohammed Jubril concurred with Dahiru, insisting that Nigeria did not need new laws on this issue. What Nigeria really needed would be greater political will and GON leadership to enforce and implement existing laws, he added. Jubril also said that they are trying to amend the police act to include better training and accountability for police. House Justice Committee Chairman Henry Dickson agreed "the legal framework is adequate but there are issues of enforcement capacity because State institutions are too weak, or too young."

POLICE AND SSS CITE POVERTY AS CAUSE OF CONFLICT

¶8. (SBU) Inspector General of Police O.O. Onovo said Nigeria

had always been a country of multiple religions, but that "poverty is the root cause of conflict." He added that lack of subsistence led people to join extremist groups. Onovo alleged that despite police arrests, state attorneys general do not prosecute perpetrators.

¶9. (C) State Security Services (SSS) Director General
Afakriya Gadzama also blamed poverty and unemployment for religious conflict. Extremist religious groups such as Boko Haram have also been a direct threat to the GON, and the entry to Nigeria of Muslims and Christians with provocative views have presented various challenges for law enforcement. Noting that he was a Christian from predominantly Muslim Borno State, he said that Nigerians are basically tolerant people who recognize the practical importance of living in harmony. He blamed state and federal government officials for failing to heed information on the dangers posed by extremists until it was often too late, as in the case of Boko Haram (ref A). More mainstream Muslims and Christians, he urged, should speak out against the political manipulation of religion.

NIREC'S INFLUENCE LIMITED BY LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE

¶10. (SBU) Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) members
Q10. (SBU) Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) members said violence continued because the fundamental problem of poverty had not been addressed. Christian Association of Nigeria Secretary Samuel Salifu said the Sultan of Sokoto and Archbishop Onaiyekan "carry NIREC along," but that without more funding and staff, the organization's impact could not be replicated at state and local levels. NIREC said reconciliation programs were needed to lift the deep-seated anger passed from generation to generation. They applauded Secretary Clinton's frank message to Nigeria in August and encouraged the USG to continue telling Nigerian leaders "the truth."

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NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

¶11. (SBU) Commissioner Leo expressed disappointment at the performance of the National Human Rights Commission (HRC)
Commissioners, including their previous failure to meet with the USCIRF. He remarked that presidential appointment of all the Commissioners and the lack of oversight undermined effectiveness of the HRC. He expressed dismay that the HRC had not investigated the November 2008 violence in Jos. HRC Director of Planning and Research Oti Ovrawah replied that a bill was under consideration by the National Assembly to allow it to confirm HRC appointments. She said the HRC could only make recommendations, and acknowledged the need for stronger enforcement of laws. Leo encouraged the HRC to make its recommendations public to promote accountability and to identify which states allowed impunity to continue.

CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

¶12. (SBU) Centre for Democracy and Development Director Dr. Jibrin Ibrahim said failure to prosecute individuals for the November 2008 Jos violence stemmed in part from state involvement in the conflicts. Ibrahim opined the GON should clarify principles on religion and the modes of federal government intervention available to the states, adding that security forces needed training on non-violent crowd control.

¶13. (U) Chief Imam of Al-Habibiyah Mosque in Abuja, Imam A.A. Fuad, told USCIRF that southern Muslims and Christians live peacefully because southerners are relatively solvent

financially, are well educated, and open to interfaith marriage. Fuad noted that his family history gives him special insight on religion: his mother was a southern Christian, his father a northern Muslim, and, although raised in the south, he now lives in the north.

¶14. (U) USCIRF did not have the opportunity to clear this cable before departing Nigeria.
SANDERS